REPORTERS ON THE GROUND:
The Military and the Media's Joint Experience During Operation Iraqi Freedom
By Professor Michael Pasquarett

INTRODUCTION

During the planning for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the Department of Defense (DoD) developed an embedded media program that planned for large numbers of embedded reporters throughout military units. Unlike Vietnam in the 1970s, this program resulted in television reporting from within Iraq, especially from those reporters embedded with front-line units, almost instantaneously. The speed that these reports made it on the air often outpaced the military's communication channels. Although it gave the American citizens an immediate close up report of what their armed forces were doing, it handicapped media analysts and stateside reporters in their ability to put the raw reporting from the field into a larger context. Conversely, those TV journalists supplying these spectacular reports and engrossing pictures from the front line were also handicapped in that they were reporting in a vacuum, unable themselves to obtain any kind of perspective or context.

How well did this program work? What went right and wrong and why? What needs to be done in the future to create a program that better informs the American people? These were just some of the issues discussed in a unique and wide-ranging workshop conducted by the United States Army War College's Center for Strategic Leadership. The event, *Reporters on the Ground: The Military and the Media's Joint Experience During Operation Iraqi Freedom*, was held from 3 to 5 September 2003 at the Collins Center, Carlisle Barracks Pennsylvania.

METHODOLOGY

The workshop structure served both as an Army After Action Review and as a forum for a free exchange of experiences, impressions, and ideas regarding the program and its future from a range of viewpoints. The workshop consisted of three consecutive panels: Tactical, Operational, and Futures. The event led off with the Tactical Panel, where embedded reporters and commanders of both Marine and Army units with embedded reporters shared equal voice. Many of these commanders are currently U.S. Army War College (USAWC) students. Following the Tactical Panel, the Operational Panel focused on the higher levels of command in Iraq and the reporting from those military headquarters. The workshop concluded with the Futures Panel, which looked at the future of the program and the long-term implications that the OIF embedded media program might have on the media and the military and their increasingly complex relationship, created in no small measure by this type of program.

During the event, participants had dinner with and presentations by author and reporter Mr. Joe Galloway, and Brigadier General Vince Brooks, U.S. Central Command spokesman during the conflict. During the final day, Major General J. D. Thurman, Chief of Operations for the Land Component Commander,

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presented his view of the strategic aspect of the media-military relationship during the planning for and execution of OIF.

THE TACTICAL PANEL

The Tactical panel discussions focused on the military-media ground rules, building trust, and the consequences of breaking that trust between soldiers and reporters. Trust became an extremely important bond, but there were many opinions on both sides whether this familiarity between the military and the media detracted from the American people receiving the total war story. Some thought that the "soda straw" approach to embedded reports missed the big picture. Others felt that the challenge of the big picture needed to be met at higher levels where editors who were seeing the entire war could compensate for their embeds' restricted view of the war. It was also obvious that the American public responded positively to this new way of reporting war—being able to look through the eyes of their favorite reporters as they rode with military units. After discussing the ground rules, trust, and many objectivity issues, the tactical panel was almost in universal agreement that the embedded reporter model is the way to cover future conflicts.

USAWC student LTC Terry Ferrell addresses the Tactical Panel. LTC Ferrell commanded the 3-7 Cavalry Squadron, 3rd Inf. Div., during OIF.

However, there were also several participants who thought that a mixture of embedded and unilateral coverage would be best. An interesting observation during this panel was that the greatest tension might not have been between the military and the news media community, but among different media components and between the embedded reporters and the unilateral reporters. Another observation shared by many was that local/regional reporters who regularly cover the posts and the units are often more knowledgeable and provide better reporting than generic national experts. After much discussion, the military and the media participants failed to come to a consensus as to whether an embedded reporter can report about a unit with complete objectivity. More important to the American public may be that trust and confidence between the embedded reporter and their units provides a new and different kind of war reporting that they will now expect to see in all future conflicts. Gun camera video, the thrill of the earlier Gulf War, was no match for embedded media reports about Sergeant Smith and his soldiers in close combat.

THE OPERATIONAL PANEL

The Operational panel consisted of recently returned Flag officers, their embedded reporters, and journalism academics focused on the military's use of the media in the conduct of information operations. Military leaders were very candid in detailing how they used the media present to help dominate the information battle. A number of media players accepted this as a reality in modern warfare. There was a great deal of debate at the operational level concerning whether the media's presence at the tactical level influenced the behavior and actions of those front-line units. The military unanimously said it did not; however, journalists

BG Vince Brooks contributes to the discussion as a member of the Operational Panel.

insisted that it did. The panel concluded that embedded reporters helped balance "good" and "bad" news, and their absence in Iraq today may account for the near absence of positive reporting from that nation. There was little discussion concerning how the military and media relationship would fare in a future conflict where the U.S. military might not be so dominant. The question that may need to be asked is, how would the military and the media handle a Kasserine Pass today?

THE FUTURES PANEL

The Futures panel sketched out the "Battle After Next" as a dispersed, isolated, and even empty battle space with heavy use of robotics and aerial maneuvers. Enemies will be more adaptive and technologically sophisticated; cultural wars will be haphazard and bloody. If the use of coalitions increases, there will be an upsurge in foreign media members, which has the potential to create security dilemmas. In the future, all media, whether embedded or unilateral, will need their own transportation and communications systems. Transportation for reporters should be armored, and communications secure. Technology will drive military battlefield transformation, and media coverage will need to acquire similar capabilities quickly.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There were many issues acknowledged during the workshop, the following were those with the greatest focus:

a. Ground Rules. All parties—military and media alike—concluded the "eight page" list of ground rules was too lengthy to be of practical use. Most felt a simple discussion between public affairs officers, their commanders, and their embedded media representatives could identify workable parameters. In fact, most present indicated that was what they did anyway. The group recommended that embedded journalists write a follow-on set of rules and then distribute them to all participates for review and subsequent DoD approval.

b. Training. Recommendations were made from both military and media representatives to toughen the pre-deployment media training and to make it available for attendance for potential embeds quarterly. This recommendation seeks to build a bench of qualified reporters who are certified to deploy on very short notice. An associated recommendation is for units to invite media members to embed with them during training at both their home station and the National Training Center to begin to build the trust that is so important to the process.

c. Media self-policing. The issues of censorship and discipline of the news media (embedded and unilateral) was discussed several times. In all discussions, the point that the media is better at this task than the military was driven home, however, self-censorship by non-U.S. journalists was not discussed. It was recommended that the media continue to develop procedures that could be accepted and implemented industry-wide within the U.S. and, perhaps, internationally. All media present were unanimous in their support for this concept.

d. Permanent Embedding. The recommendation was made that the military follow the examples of police departments, sports teams, and political campaigns and have permanently embedded reporters. None of the embeds seemed to think that this would compromise their objectivity. Cost to the media companies may restrict participation with units.

e. Military Casualty Reporting. The now-instantaneous nature of battlefield communications and reporting and of fellow soldiers with access to email and satellite phones has challenged the military's very deliberate casualty reporting and notification system. First reports can be wrong, however; the military needs to review the technology available today to enable the military to improve the notification process.

CONCLUSION

MG J.D. Thurman provides his strategic perspective on media-military relations.

War is incredibly complex and has always tested the limits of human endurance for those under fire and in battle. The embedded media program placed journalists, soldiers, and marines together in the same environment. Under such circumstances, whether reporters can or cannot be objective may be irrelevant. What is important is the trust and confidence built between those embattled soldiers and the embedded media that accompany and report on them and their actions. This unique kind of war reporting appears to have won the trust and confidence of the American public. Such success increases the burden on both the military and the media to ensure continued integrity of the reporting within a program that has heightened the expectations of the American public.

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